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All aboard the leadership bandwagon?

Walter Humes and Deirdre Torrance

For more than a decade, political administrations of different complexions have promoted leadership as a vital component of achieving success in education. This has been reflected in successive policy documents and has stimulated a substantial body of academic literature on the subject. There have been numerous classifications of different types of leadership; courses and qualifications have been developed to nurture leadership potential; and a range of criteria have been used to assess leadership quality (including exam results, inspection reports, standards of discipline and staff morale).

Despite all this effort, however, there remains little agreement, either in the policy documents or in the academic literature, about the precise meaning of key terms. The discourse of leadership remains conceptually weak and has been subject to changing fashions. This point can be illustrated by looking at what some influential documents have said. Leadership is a recurring motif in the Donaldson report on teacher education (2010), the McCormac review of teacher employment (2011) and the General Teaching Council for Scotland’s revised suite of Professional Standards (2012).

The first of Donaldson’s fifty recommendations is that ‘Educational policy in Scotland should give the highest priority to further strengthening the quality of its teachers and of its educational leadership’. Its final recommendation is that a virtual college of school leadership should be developed ‘to improve leadership capacity at all levels within Scottish education’. At all stages of career progression, from initial training onwards, the development of leadership skills and abilities is seen as an essential element in ‘the enhanced professional role for teachers’ which Donaldson seeks to promote. Particular mention is made of ‘distributive forms of leadership’ and ‘leadership for learning’, the former representing a move away from top-down styles of management, the latter referring to the teacher’s role in promoting knowledge, skills and understanding.
McCormac endorses the general thrust of Donaldson’s recommendations and calls for ‘a reinvigorated professionalism in teaching’, an important part of which is strengthening the quality of leadership. Referring to the demands of Curriculum for Excellence, the report states that its full realisation ‘can only be achieved through the professionalism of teachers, working as leaders of the educational process’. In line with its desire to see increased flexibility in the deployment of teachers, it calls for greater recognition of the contribution of staff other than ‘formal leaders’ to the success of schools as effective learning organisations. However, it stops short of identifying these non-formal leadership roles or indicating how they might interact with those holding designated promoted posts.

A similar preference for generic descriptions of leadership can be found in statements contained in the GTCS Professional Standards. It is asserted that ‘All teachers should have opportunities to be leaders’ but little guidance is offered as to precisely what forms of leadership are intended or how they are to be enacted. There are some references to ‘leadership for learning’, ‘pedagogical leadership’ and leading ‘collaborative practitioner enquiry’ but these are not elaborated. What is needed is a fuller articulation of how the various types of leadership that may be manifested in a school each contribute to the enhancement of professionalism which the standards are intended to bring about. Without such articulation, there is a danger of what Spillane and Coldren refer to as staff ‘talking past one another’, to little effect.

Sitting alongside these statements are the aspirations of Curriculum for Excellence. From the outset of the programme, it was stated that the aim was to give teachers more scope to exercise their professional judgement in relation to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment – in other words, to show leadership. This has been welcomed by some teachers but others have found it difficult, coming after decades of centralised prescription, to believe that they really are being encouraged to strike out in a different direction. This helps to explain the frequent calls for more guidance and greater clarity about what exactly is required.

In some ways the vagueness of many statements about leadership in policy documents is not surprising because it merely reflects uncertainty within the academic literature. Educational leadership as a disciplinary field remains fairly confused. One of the leading writers on the subject, Kenneth Leithwood, has said that ‘the meaning of leadership remains murky, and its present status
is highly dependent on a set of possibly fleeting, modern, Western values’. Another, Peter Gronn, has stated that ‘a significant amount of the field’s understanding of leadership is grounded in highly dubious and problematic assumptions’. On distributed leadership, John Macbeath has written that ‘it is a contested concept embracing a wide range of understandings and often bearing little apparent relationship to what happens in schools and classrooms’. Similarly, some writers on teacher leadership question the extent to which the concept has been subject to rigorous research interrogation, and ask whether it is realistic to expect all teachers to demonstrate wider leadership capacity beyond their own subject and classroom.

The vogue for leadership is a good example of ‘discursive capture’, the tendency for a particular term to gain popularity and become a widely-used item of professional discourse. However, simply repeating the term and urging everyone to subscribe to it is not sufficient to bring about significant changes in thinking, attitude and practice. What is needed is a much more systematic approach, involving both conceptual analysis and empirical investigation. This calls for a type of leadership that is rarely mentioned – namely intellectual leadership.

It is also important to ask why the emphasis on leadership has arisen at this particular time. If schools are not doing as well as we would like, it is rather convenient for politicians and officials to say that it’s down to the front-line staff in schools, rather than to the high-level ‘leadership’ they themselves offer, the policies they promote and the resources they provide. Good leadership (which comes in many forms) is undoubtedly important in schools, but it needs to be seen in the wider political context within which headteachers and other staff have to operate.

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